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# The Abiding Presence, n.d.

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## THE ABIDING PRESENCE

Few stories in the entire Sacred Record are more dear to the Christian heart than the story of Emmaus. Here in a few sentences all the comfort and glory of Easter are applied directly to the problems of life and living. Here we see, clearly and finally, the meaning of the open tomb for our own journey toward the last sunset. The entire story is a striking parable of human life. It began in confusion and pain and ended in faith and joy. It began in darkness and ended in the white light of the Sun of Righteousness. It began in loneliness and ended in the magnificent truth that since Easter morning no believing heart need ever be alone again.

The story itself is familiar to Christian memory. About this time, on the afternoon of the first Easter day many years ago, two of the sorrowing disciples, weary with the black memory of Good Friday were walking toward Emmaus. Their hearts were filled with sadness and fear. They were face to face with the end of everything they had hoped and believed. Three days had come and gone since the news of His death had reached them. Nothing more had happened. True, a few of the faithful women had been at the sepulchre that morning and had astonished them by reporting that the body was not in the grave. That, however, seemed to be only a wild rumor.

As they walked and talked, our Lord joined them on the way. Their eyes, dark with sorrow and blinded with tears, did not recognize Him. He asked the reason <sup>r</sup> for their sadness. They told Him the story of the mighty words and <sup>deeds</sup> and

of Him Whom they had now lost, of His shameful death, of the ruin of all their hopes and dreams, and of the strange report of the women on that third morning. Their recital ended with the simple, sorrowing words: "But Him they saw not." No matter what they had heard, they wanted to see Him. If only they could see Him once more! If only they could know that He was alive! Then all that had gone before would be as a momentary dream in the night, lost and forgotten in the light of His presence.

And then the Stranger spoke! "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." He reached far back into the dawn of time in order to show them why Good Friday and the Cross had to come. He spoke of Moses and David and Isaiah. He showed them how the prophets had foretold everything that had happened. This was no sudden and unexpected event planned and executed by the powers of darkness. All of it, every single step, was a part of the eternal councils of the Holy Trinity, conceived in eternity and executed in time: "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" This was the great divine "ought," the eternal "must." All these things ought to be, He told them, in order that through the glory of Bethlehem, the pain of Good Friday, and the victory of Easter the souls of men might be redeemed.

But still they knew Him not! Only after He had gone in to tarry with them, the simple little act of breaking the bread and blessing it suddenly opened their eyes so that they knew Him. Perhaps their memory suddenly went back to the days when they had seen Him do this in Galilee and Judaea. "Their eyes were opened and they knew Him." The grave was really empty! Their Lord was alive! He had won the final victory over death. Now they knew that Easter had come. They said to Him: "Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent."



Many centuries before the still dawn of Easter Day a great cry, wrung from the heart of Job, began to echo across the waiting ages: "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Taken up and repeated by countless saints, in the years of life and the hours of death, it became the great, eternal message of the open grave and the empty tomb. Early in the morning the women hurrying to the grave with the sorrow of death returned from the grave with the joy of life. The stunned silence of the disciples, torn between the warm faith of their hearts and the hard fact of the Cross, became the everlasting antiphon for the voice of Job. "I know that my Redeemer liveth." All the ages could now sing it and all men could now know it. The stone rolled away had been made by the hand of God a witness to His eternal power and a monument to His living Presence.

The story of Emmaus has been repeated countless times since that first Easter evening. By the grace of God it can also be our story. Its courage and victory can come also to us who live so far down the ways of time. "Abid with us for it is toward evening and the day is far spent."

One of the dark marks of our time is its uncertainty. Men are not sure of anything. In fact, it has become fashionable to doubt. It is considered smart and sophisticated to be uncertain. The result has been ruin and death. In such an age nothing is more desperately important than the question: Is there anything that is sure and permanent in life?

The answer lies in our Easter faith. There is nothing vague or mysterious or indefinite about it. Its message is: Christ lives. He lives with us. He lives for us. A believing child can understand that. It is clear and sure. It is a fact witnessed by history and certified by faith.

Just how does He live with us? Although He ascended into heaven on the afternoon of Ascension Day, He did not leave the disciples afraid and alone. Within



a few days they became a conquering host. Confounded and appalled by the tragedy of Good Friday, huddled behind locked doors in hidden houses in Jerusalem, they became the indomitable bearers of the Cross, the men and women before whom the Roman Empire began to tremble. If they became living fagots, they knew they were torches of the Gospel. If they died, their faces at the moment of death were like Stephen's, the "face of an angel." They lived "under the long looks of God and His glances of a thousand years." Why? Because He had answered their prayer "Abide with us" with the great sentence which ends all loneliness and fear for the Christian heart: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." It is true that we cannot see Him with our eyes or touch Him with our hands. He has His own way of being with us in the world. It is a great and a sure way. It stretches beyond and above the noise of the world and the dark highways of men as the great, shining highway of the King of kings. This way lies in His word and His Sacraments. He comes to us through these means of grace. In them and through them He enters our hearts. There is no other way by which we can live in His abiding presence. No good works or seemingly holy life will bring Him to us. At Emmaus the disciples remembered that He had opened the Holy Scriptures to them: ""Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?" So He comes to us today through His Word, and our eyes are opened to His Presence by His grace. When he ascended from the earth in His glorified body to rule the centuries from the right hand of His Father in heaven, He left us His life, His death, His forgiveness in the pages of the Holy Scriptures and in the Sacraments. Through them the story of Emmaus was to be repeated again and again, every day and every hour of Christian history. By them the Comforter was to bring faith into our sorrowing hearts and companionship to our lonely

lives. They were to bring us the blessed assurance of the forgiveness of sins, peace and salvation.

Do not our hearts burn within us as we remember today how often we have neglected these means of His coming into our lives? On the way to Emmaus the eyes of the disciples were darkened by sorrow and fear. Somehow they had to be opened again to the glory and power of His abiding presence. Today when our hearts are so often shadowed by the darkness of hate and blood, by our countless fears over the future, by the storms of war, dare we neglect the only way in the world by which faith and courage and hope can come alive again in our eyes? This is the way to Emmaus--with Him. Even today it winds past the noise and confusion of the world to the pulpit and altar of our Church and to the Bible in our homes. There our Lord waits to answer all our questions and end all our fears.

By the grace of God this can be our first lesson today: Our risen Savior abides with us in His Word and Sacraments. When we use them faithfully, regularly, frequently, He draws near to us. Our eyes are opened and we see Him. Our faith beholds Him as He was foretold by prophets, born in the manger, dying on the Cross, breaking the tomb, so that He may now abide with us forever, here by the means of grace, and there by the vision of glory. This is most certainly true!

Everything our Lord does is done for us. We are the objects of His eternal love. When He comes to us and abides with us He has certain definite purposes in His mind and heart. He wishes to give us something. His presence means something great and beautiful. The disciples at Emmaus knew that. Their plea "Abide with us" was based on the statement "for it is toward evening and the day is far spent." It was growing dark. The Stranger Who had opened the Scriptures to them would be good company for the coming night. As they had listened to Him, their hearts had burned with a new courage and a far hope. They wanted Him to stay with them because in His presence they had found a new understanding of the



counsels of God and their meaning for history and life.

This has always been the blessed experience of the believing heart. The presence of the risen Savior changes everything in life. Absolutely everything! Forty days after Emmaus He was standing with His disciples on a hillside in Galilee. His voice came to them like the rush of mighty waters which would tear them from their moorings and hurl them over the Roman Empire: "Go ye and teach all nations." Because of the magnitude of this task He immediately added the words which repeat the shining story of Emmaus: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." Although a cloud was about to take Him away from their sight, no cloud and no shadow would ever come between Him and the vision of their faith. If happiness was to come to them, it would be the happiness reflected from the light of His presence; if honor, it was to be the honor of Calvary; if glory, it was to be the glory of His love. He would abide with them forever.

This must be our prayer after these many years. If we ask Him, He always stays.

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Countless men and women have ~~lived~~ and died in His Presence for almost two thousand years. It is still the best way to live and to die. The entire Holy Scriptures end with the moving words "Come Lord Jesus." Whenever and wherever these words are spoken in repentant faith, we hear His answering voice--old and lovely, healing and tender--"Yea, I come quickly." He crosses the threshold of our hearts and life can never be the same again. In the continuing mercy of His presence we can forget the huge, invisible load of care and sin, the intolerable burden of the remembered years, and all the cares and sorrows which make life so dark for the men and women who walk the ways of the world without Him.

This is what His abiding presence can do for us also Today. As seldom before in the history of the world, men have lost their faith in man-made things.

They have found that education and science cannot give the final answer to the



problems which trouble and perplex the souls of men. They are haunted by a feeling of failure and defeat. Also the Christian heart is sometimes touched by this universal feeling of futility and despair. When we look at our own lives, we find that we are seldom completely happy. We are aware of our own weaknesses and defeats. We remember old sins and old troubles. We feel that the world about us is rushing toward destruction. Our weary hearts cry out for the living God, for the calm peace and sure rest which can be found in Him alone. The Easter message of the abiding presence of the risen Savior is the only possible solace and comfort for our ills. It tells us that we can now live with Him Who took all our troubles and sins up to Calvary and buried them in the forgiveness of God. It assures us that through the forgiveness of sins we can begin each day anew. As we walk with His nail-torn hands in ours, life begins to move and live. It is no longer a dull routine. We live with Him. He knew its meaning and purpose. The world may say: "Happy is the man who is rich, who is powerful, who is popular, who enjoys life, who can do what he wants to do." Our Savior tells us that the world is fearfully wrong. Across the tears and the graves of those who thought that the world was right He comes into our lives to tell us that with Him there is a new set of standards and an eternal value and importance in our brief journey between the cradle and the grave. In His presence we cannot be afraid, because He is not afraid; we cannot be dismayed, because He is not dismayed; we cannot be conquered, because He will not be conquered. Facing all the storms and tears of life, there is always Someone by our side who knew them all and suffered them for our sake.

This is the continuing power and glory of our Easter faith. As the shadows of Time lengthen and the hour of man grows late, we shall need this faith more than ever before. Much work remains to be done in the world so that the message

of the risen Savior may be brought to new millions sitting in an old darkness.

Finally, only the men and women who live in the abiding Presence of the King of kings can bring peace and hope to the hurt and bewildered souls of men.

Our Savior's company can never be an excuse for idling and drifting through life. While He gives us peace for our souls, He also gives us work for our hands. Since we live with Him, we have the blessed privilege of bringing Him to others who do not know the grace and power of His presence. Our days and years belong to Him and He asks us to use them for Him until the night comes. Just as the disciples at Emmaus hurried back to tell others that they had seen their Lord, so we are called to go out into the world of our friends, our neighbors and our enemies and tell them of His everlasting grace and mercy.

"Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent." Let this be our humble and heartfelt prayer as we again behold the glory of Easter and its meaning for us. Let it be for us the assurance that in the Word and Sacraments our Savior is here with us and will never leave us nor forsake us. Let it be for us a challenge to work for Him and with Him while we wait for the day when He shall come again to translate our faith in His abiding presence into the vision of His eternal victory.